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Seeking a Pedagogy of Honesty

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ABSTRACT

With multiple cultural, academic, and religious forces urging students and faculty to default to varying degrees of academic and personal dishonesty, we need to seriously consider how the structures we implement as educators reinforce or undermine those urges. After briefly considering some of the varieties of academic dishonesty we face in religion and theology classrooms, this essay proposes an alternative model for a flow of communication that short-circuits usual expectations and encourages an ethos of honest participation. The proposed solution, called a Discussion Plan, represents an attempt to make the classroom's center of gravity the honest questions, honest observations, honest confusions, and honest exasperations that are uniquely relevant to the actual students of the particular class. This intentional dismantling of regimes of dishonesty with a pedagogy of honesty requires vulnerability and the hard work of active engagement but pays off with richer student participation and creativity.

KEYWORDS

academic honesty, academic dishonesty, test, quiz, communication

Academic dishonesty is a big problem, and it's not limited to what we normally associate with it. Sure, we need to set high standards to make sure that neither we nor our students commit the fraud of plagiarism. Of course. But plagiarism is merely the flowering of a deeper and more sinister root, just one of the many faces of academic dishonesty that inspire me to function according to a pedagogy of honesty.¹

¹ The content of this essay emerges from my more than two decades of teaching religion and theology in high school and undergraduate classrooms interacting with more than 1500 students and numerous generous and gifted teaching colleagues. Chief among those colleagues is Dr. Claire Bischoff, who generously provided valuable feedback on this essay. It is somewhat uncomfortable to admit that rather than relying on outside research, the content of this essay flows directly from my practice of classroom teaching. With that in mind, perhaps it will become clear that a pedagogy of honesty demands that we not simply hide behind what the teaching "experts" write but rather start by interrogating our own teaching practices and responding to the needs of the actual students in our care.

We admit students to college so that they can learn something new. And yet, many college classrooms operate in such a way that students feel they can only speak up if they know something with absolute certainty. That attitude begs a question: If they already know it all, why would they be taking this class? In this sort of environment, is it any wonder that so many of our students have anxiety about speaking up in class?

We are awash in an insidious contemporary imperative to know, think, and say everything all at once—and always in the currently fashionable, politically correct way. The social media frenzy to police thought and expression puts all at risk of violent virtual skewering.² The sharpened knives of critics are always ready to cut down anyone who does not say exactly the “right” thing in exactly the “right” way with every “correct” term and every “correct” nuance included. There is fear of being shamed for “trying on” an idea, for saying something out loud for the first time, and possibly not getting it quite right. That fear can drive a person to a kind of academic dishonesty that blindly parrots the coercively required stance as if it were one’s own. That fear sometimes also drives self-censorship to maintain the silent illusion of competency. Such obfuscation is another kind of academic dishonesty. Mere submissive conformity to an authority and the retreat into silence are two potent versions of academic dishonesty, indeed.

It is easy to see the double-edged cultural sword that relishes the hatred of elitists³ (because common sense can supposedly understand what experts know, just without all the pesky work) while seemingly needing to defend our stance as if it is a final and irreversible moral decision made by a credentialed expert. It’s a disastrous recipe that silences the wary and empowers the aggressive.

In theology the toxic imperative toward certainty is redoubled when someone feels the intense shame that they should know scripture, should know about worship practices, should understand convoluted theologies. And then especially in religion and theology classrooms we run the risk of adding to those shoulds. Here come clichés about faith in impossible things and the supposed weakness of people without faith. That can lead students to assert certainty where there is none. Such assertion in a classroom is one form of academic dishonesty that may inhibit other students from speaking up at all since they are so afraid to be wrong. Again, we see a noxious sludge of fear and dishonesty.

Meanwhile, the sometimes-severe demands of religious and confessional orthodoxy and a long history of mutual excommunications are not just dusty historical artifacts. Theology and religion habitually wield some sharp and blunt instruments of intellectual violence. We should be honest about that.

The stakes seem so high to our students to claim to be right and to aggressively defend their rightness, even in the face of contradictory evidence. And the impotent and immature theology some of our students arrive with only makes a culture of honesty more difficult to nurture. What I like to call the rampant Santa theology (the old, bearded, white, male, all-seeing, all-knowing, all-righteous inflictor of reward-and-punishment schemes according to the results of universal surveillance) does not withstand adult critique, mature questions, and righteous doubt. But if Santa theology is the only kind our students have received in their first decade and a half of religious education, we cannot be surprised if they are urged toward two insidious forms of academic dishonesty: (1) unmerited dedication to absolutely defending that theology, or (2) being absolutely unwilling to take a risk to discuss the rich theologies we ask them to consider.

2 While examples of character assassination or cancel culture for not placing one’s toes exactly on the presently fashionable line are too numerous to mention, one notable illustration merits highlighting. JK Rowling has been aggressively called out on social media for her views on sex and gender. In a blog post, she patiently explains her position (“[J.K. Rowling Writes about Her Reasons for Speaking out on Sex and Gender Issues](#),” *JKRowling.com*, June 10, 2020).

3 To get a sense for the attitude that deplores elitism, here is a helpful article: “Elitists, crybabies and junky degrees: A Trump supporter explains rising conservative anger at American universities” ([Sullivan and Jordan](#), *Washington Post*, Nov. 25, 2017).

Quizzing as a Dishonesty Trap

Add to all of this the longstanding classroom convention of quizzes and tests. The mindset behind quizzing appears to encourage academic dishonesty rather than hampering it. How? At their heart quizzes seek to prove what content a student has or has not retained from a reading, a lecture, or a unit. When testing is the means by which we seek to determine the edges of a student's appropriation of course material, we set a dishonesty trap.

When students know a test is coming, they plead for (even sometimes demand—I know because I was a student who made such pleas and demands) all the questions that could be asked. Worse yet, students then want to use large amounts of class time to go through the questions and write down the precise answers. Handing over the questions (and answers) artificially reduces the vast complexities we are meant to consider—and amounts to an act of widely-practiced academic dishonesty by the professor.

What else do students do? They cram to remember the answers to the possible questions just long enough to take the quiz. This is academic dishonesty because it is absurd to imagine that cramming is something we can honestly call learning. And what if the professor declines to hand over the list of questions? When cramming is not possible, the student's job becomes convincing the professor they know what they might not actually know. Here again academic dishonesty reigns.

That is only a partial list of forms of academic dishonesty; no single solution can address all its faces. Recognizing the pervasive, multivalent complexities of academic dishonesty seeping into every aspect of academic life led me to seriously change my teaching in recent years, in search of a pedagogy of honesty.

Planning for Honest Discussion

If students complete a reading assignment and think their next job is to have to pretend they understood it, academic honesty is crushed. Seeking a pedagogy of honesty means we need strategies that reinforce students' honest expression. The solution I have worked out for my courses is a strategy that makes a "Discussion Plan" (DP) the engine that runs the course.

Discussion Plans⁴ require students to meet the challenge of the reading by thinking their own thoughts and composing a responsive paragraph and a minimum of two critical thinking questions that quote the actual words of the reading. A Googleable question or a question that can be answered by a dictionary do not count. Good critical thinking questions contain a genuine quest to explore, discover, and discuss. Important here is that these are the student's own unvarnished first responses—unfettered by my views on the subject. Often students wish to know what I think before they formulate their view. But, if I provide my stance before they have a chance to try it out for themselves, the risk is that they will merely conform to my more authoritative position—and such conformity is another dishonesty trap. So, the DP should be composed of what the student (not the professor) really wants to investigate from the assignment. I impress upon my students that what I need to get from a DP is their honest engagement: tell me what made sense, what made no sense, where you felt supported, what made you mad, where you agree, where you disagree. When each student's own genuine quest grounds the class discussion, we experience a palpable relevancy to the ideas in the reading.

A second feature of the DP is that discussion does not wait for class to begin. Students post their DP the night before class to a "Conversation Circle," a small group that remains constant over the semester. In this stable Conversation Circle, ideas get flowing before the class meets face-to-face. Students must respond by posting a reply to one Conversation Circle member before class starts. Then, in-class discussion begins with that Conversation Circle as a home-base before we have large group discussion.

4 Why is this called a Discussion Plan? The idea is simple: I tell students, if they are called to lead the discussion for a few minutes during class they will be able to bring forward their actual response and their actual questions written in their plan for what they wish to discuss. For the student worried about speaking up in class, the DP is a safety zone: when they need to talk, all they may have to do is read their question to spark conversation. They have their plan at their fingertips, so do not necessarily have to improvise on the spot. The DP can help decrease anxiety which is frequently an impetus toward academic dishonesty.

Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, when students post their honest engagement with the assignment, I have a sacred obligation. I must read their initial DPs and make modifications to my lesson plan.⁵ The exquisite vulnerability of students asking true questions, and expressing true confusions, angers, or delights is a delicate reality which must be handled with care. My job is to weave their DP work into what we do together. The students need to recognize their concerns and their questions reflected in what I have prepared when we gather. And this is when the light comes on for students. When I stop by a Conversation Circle and ask someone to highlight something they have written, or when students see their worries folded into the plan for the day, they know it is tangibly advantageous to bring their full honesty to the course.⁶

The DP requires one more crucial component. During class, students must annotate their printed DP. Their mission is to get their questions into the conversation and get some kind of answer or further question during class. In a way, students come to class having generated their own quiz, composed of questions they uniquely and individually care about. So, in the space I ask students to leave after each paragraph and after each question, they are required to write something more about the observation and the question. In this self-generated “quiz”: further exasperation at an as yet unanswered question (or even an unanswerable one!), a new question, a restated question, a revised question, a big aha! Moment, a provisional answer, a new connection, a classmate’s insight, and even sometimes my suggestion. All of these can be the “correct” answer they write.

After class, I collect and read what students wrote during class. Here is where I find out whether we accomplished what was required, or if more work needs to be done. I write comments responding further to what they wrote during class. They get the DP back from me when next we meet.

Some Preliminary Reflections

What just happened? When things go as planned, rather than a standoff where all of us are trying to score a rhetorical point, or misdirect away from our misunderstanding, or hide our inadequacies, DPs create a flow of communication that bears directly on the relevancy of students’ honest questions and responses. I depart that final reading of their in-class notes with a good sense for what was and was not accomplished during class. And I did not have to quiz anyone. This method of communication-flow with my students requires timeliness and keen attention. But those are small prices to pay for the gains of the many benefits of honesty.

Though DPs are a rigorous tool, I have regularly gotten feedback that this is a successful method. For instance, one student wrote in an evaluation, “The use of Discussion Plans is one of the most effective learning tools I’ve ever received in any class.” Another wrote, “The Discussion Plans are my favorite thing.”

Finally, permit me to mention one more kind of academic honesty that’s my constant task. I must be willing, and even eager to say the words, “I don’t know,” when I don’t know. If students see the truth that I can be honest about the horizons of my knowledge, it makes it safer for them to be honest. There is spaciousness and freedom in this kind of honesty.

Though more needs to be said, since I have implemented these efforts toward a pedagogy of honesty, I have observed a decline in plagiarism and other faces of academic dishonesty. But every semester I am greeted with students who have been formed and harmed by cultural, academic, and religious enforcement regimes that have taught them habits of dishonesty. So, every semester unteaching that dishonesty with a pedagogy of honesty is my sacred responsibility.

⁵ I should add, and this is no small thing, if anything prevents me from reading their DPs, I apologize and let them know right at the start of class.

⁶ It is still disconcerting to me that students frequently express surprise that I have read, considered, and included their ideas into class activities. Sadly, many are accustomed to receiving little feedback, and unaccustomed to experiencing their genuine contribution to the learning of their classmates. But, once the light goes on and they realize this is for real, many students are inspired to pour even more honest energy and creativity into their DPs and the course as a whole.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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